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ABSTRACT

To establish the prevalence and perceived value of realistic work environments (RWEs) in colleges and their use as learning resources, all further education (FE) sector colleges in Great Britain were surveyed in the summer of 1998. Of 175 colleges that responded to 2 questionnaires for senior college managers and RWE managers, 127 had at least 1 RWE and, on average, each responding institution had three RWEs. Long-established RWEs in catering, hair-dressing, and beauty therapy were still the most common; secretarial and reception services were strong; and newer RWEs in tourism and theater reflected an increase in jobs. Almost two-thirds of RWEs had existed for five years or longer; fewer than 5 percent were less than one year old. RWE customers were almost evenly divided between local residents and college staff or students. Nearly half of RWEs provided training and assessment opportunities for more than 50 students per week, others for fewer than 20. The mean number of staff in an RWE was seven. Student benefits were assessment opportunities, motivation, skills development, and experiencing the transition between education and working life. Major concerns were resourcing issues and striking a balance between offering the service as an enterprise and using it as a training resource. Senior managers valued service provision over income generation. Other concerns were continuity of service and working to capacity. (YLB)

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Developing skills:

realistic work environments in further education

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Summary

1. FE colleges have a long tradition of providing learning environments that operate as business enterprises while offering opportunities for training and assessment of work-based learning. FEDA undertook a survey of all FE sector colleges to find out about the range of these realistic work environments (RWEs) in colleges and their use as learning resources.

2. As the vocational curriculum has moved towards learning and assessment methods that are directly relevant to the demands of the workplace, skills development in RWEs and simulated work experience have been criticised as second best. However, there may be learning needs that require a work context, but are actually better developed initially in an RWE than in the real workplace.

3. NVQs accredit performance in role, and successive governments have promoted their uptake in order to develop the skills of the workforce. More recently, the National Skills Task Force has called for learning opportunities that prepare for entry to the workforce – related vocational qualifications (RVQs).

4. One hundred and seventy-five colleges (36% of the sector total at the time) responded to a FEDA survey. Of these 175 colleges, 127 (73%) indicated that they had at least one RWE. On average, each responding institution had three RWEs.

5. The long-established RWEs in catering, hairdressing and beauty therapy are still the most common. Secretarial and reception services are also strong, and newer RWEs in tourism and theatre reflect the increase in jobs in these areas.

6. Almost two-thirds of RWEs have existed for five years or longer and fewer than 5% of the total are less than one year old.

7. RWE customers are almost evenly divided between local residents and college staff or students – hairdressing and catering being more likely to attract external customers.

8. Nearly half of all RWEs provide training and assessment opportunities for over 50 students per week, but others are operating with fewer than 20 students per week.

9. **The mean number of staff in an RWE is seven.** These include a wide range of roles such as grounds maintenance, technician and lecturer. Eighty-eight per cent of staff have prior experience of real work in the area in which they provide training.

10. Assessment opportunities, motivation and skills development are seen as major benefits for students. Additional benefits include experiencing the transition between education and working life, such as the 'unsociable' aspects of work.

11. Although resourcing issues are a major concern, over half of the respondents to the survey also identified striking a balance between offering the service as an enterprise, and using it as a training resource.

12. Senior managers in FE institutions appear to value the provision of the service over income generation, even where relatively high costs are involved.

13. Issues about the appropriateness of NVQ outcomes derived from an RWE setting need to be addressed. There appears to be increasing recognition that there is a role for both NVQs and vocational qualifications that develop knowledge and skills in a more controlled setting.[1]

14. Colleges should capitalise on opportunities for the development and practice of skills in a realistic but controlled environment, rather than apologising for the lack of real workplace assessment.

15. The Learning and Skills Council should ensure that the important role of RWEs is taken into account when determining how skills can be developed to meet the Competitiveness agenda.

1. Second report of the National Skills Task Force. *Delivering skills for all*. DfEE, 1999.

Introduction

16. Many FE colleges have a long tradition of providing training restaurants, hairdressing salons, beauty salons or sports centres that operate as business enterprises while offering opportunities for training and assessment of work-based learning. However, little is known about the incidence of these realistic work environments (RWEs) or their contribution to vocational education and training (VET).

17. To find out about the range of RWEs in colleges and their use as learning resources, FEDA surveyed all FE sector colleges during the summer of 1998. For the purposes of this project, a realistic work environment was defined as:

> *A unit or teaching area of the college providing training and assessment opportunities in a specific set of vocational competencies and other skills, while providing a service for groups of paying customers or clients in a context which mirrors real work settings.*

18. The vocational curriculum in FE has increasingly moved towards learning and assessment methods that are directly relevant to the demands of the workplace. NVQs accredit performance in role, and successive governments have promoted their uptake in an attempt to develop the skills of the workforce. Skills development in RWEs and simulated work experience have been criticised as second best. More recently, however, the National Skills Task Force has called for learning opportunities that prepare for entry to the workforce – related vocational qualifications (RVQs).[2] Some learning needs require a work context, but may actually be better developed in an RWE than in the workplace.

19. This report analyses the findings of FEDA's survey and should be of special interest to planners, managers and practitioners at a time when relevance of the curriculum to the workplace and skills development is a major concern.

Surveying the RWEs

20. The survey was undertaken in the summer of 1998.[3] Nearly 500 FE providers, including sixth form colleges, were sent questionnaires. Two questionnaires were used. One was aimed at senior college managers, to gain an overview of policies, practices and range with regard to RWEs. The second was aimed at RWE managers and requested more detailed information on their administration and value. During the autumn of 1998, visits and telephone interviews were undertaken to follow up major issues and to assist in the interpretation of the data.

Table 1 Important aspects of RWEs

Factors	%
Working to quality standards	92
Developing work habits	89
Dealing with customers	88
Assessment of competence *in situ*	86
Working to deadlines	83
Need for communication	78
Need to consider efficiency	53
Opportunities for reflection	45

2. The government consultation on reforms to Modern Apprenticeships intends to refer to these qualifications as 'technical certificates' to avoid confusion for the public, although distinctive titles will be generated.

3. *The use of realistic work environments in skills development*. RPM 159. FEDA, 1998.

Findings

21. The questionnaires were sent to all colleges in the FEFC and FEFC(W) sector. Of those contacted, 175 – approximately a third – responded. Of these respondents, 127 indicated that they had at least one RWE. Sixth form colleges comprised 33 of the 175 who responded, and only three of them had an RWE. If this pattern were repeated across all colleges, it would indicate that only around 10% of sixth form colleges have RWEs, whereas this survey suggests that at least 80% of general FE colleges have them. It can therefore be concluded that learning in RWEs is a significant activity within general FE colleges.

Range and numbers of RWEs

22. The mean number of RWEs in each institution that responded to the survey was approximately three. The survey identified 514 RWEs of 24 different types (see Table 2 opposite).

23. Table 2 shows that the established RWEs in catering, hairdressing and beauty therapy are still the most frequently found in colleges. Business and secretarial, especially when combined with reception services, are also strong. The newer development of RWEs in tourism and theatre, for example, indicates the increase in jobs in these areas. The requirement to maintain a working farm in land-based colleges is also reflected.

24. Nearly two-thirds of these RWEs (61.5%) have existed for five years or longer, less than 5% are under one year old. This suggests that there is stability in the provision of RWE services and products, but the problem seems to be how to stimulate new RWEs in the current climate.

RWE customers

25. Users of RWEs are almost evenly divided between internal and external customers. External customers comprise 54% of RWE users (45% of all RWE users are local community residents, 9% of all RWE users are from local business). Internal customers comprise the remaining 46% of RWE users; this is split almost equally between college staff and students. It varies according to the RWE – hairdressing and catering are more likely to attract external customers.

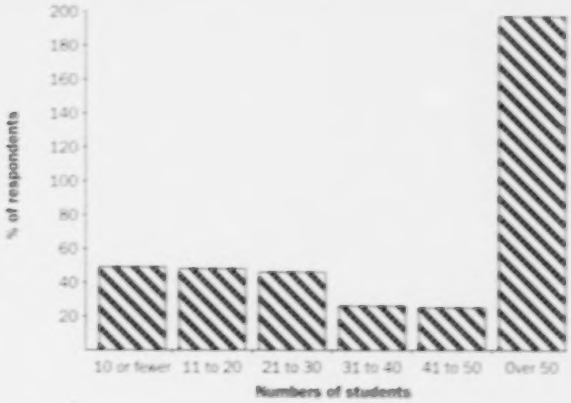
Table 2 Range and number of RWEs in FE colleges

Activity	Number	% with RWEs (n=127)
Catering facility	95	74.8
Hairdressing/beauty therapy	91	71.8
Business secretarial	66	52.0
Travel agency	58	45.7
Garage services	40	31.5
Sports facilities	35	27.6
Theatre/drama studio	26	20.5
Reception services	20	15.7
Construction services	20	15.7
Art and design studio	18	14.2
Information technology services	12	9.4
Printing facilities	9	7.1
Farms, gardens, horticulture, floristry	7	5.5
Animal care, equine and equestrian	5	3.9
Retail shop	2	1.6
Media services, journalism	2	1.6
Chiropody	1	0.8
Sports therapy	1	0.8
Holistic therapy	1	0.8
Crèche, parent and toddlers group	1	0.8
Navigation	1	0.8
Welding, fabrication	1	0.8
Engineering	1	0.8
Paper-making	1	0.8
Total	**514**	—

RWEs and training

26. The number of students or trainees engaged in the RWE as a training activity rather than as customers is an indication of their significance. Figure 1 (below) suggests that about half of all RWEs provide training and assessment opportunities for over 50 students per week but others are used by fewer than 20.

Figure 1 Frequency chart of numbers of students engaged in RWE training each week (based on responses from 391 managers)



RWE staff

27. The survey indicates that nearly 3000 staff spend some of their working week in an RWE. Based on responses from 395 of the RWEs, there is an average of 7.6 staff per RWE, although the range extends up to 70. Not all of them are engaged in training or assessment: some are appointed to provide the service or manage the business enterprise. The weekly allocation of staff hours per RWE centre ranges from 2 to 1000. There is an average of 77.8 staff hours for each RWE per week.

28. The staff are predominantly:

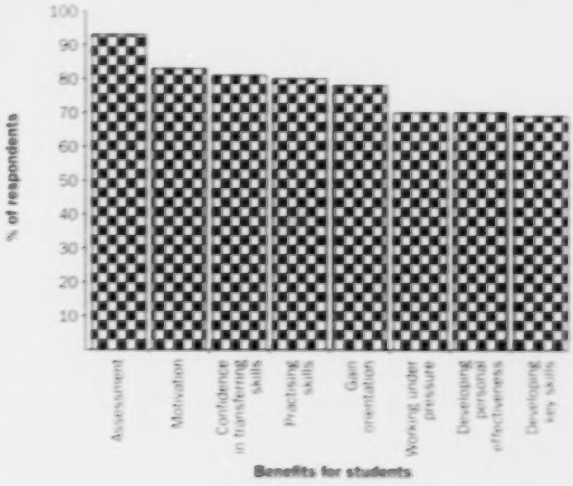
- lecturers
- instructors
- skills tutors
- assessors and internal verifiers
- learning support staff
- technicians/administrative/clerical staff
- managers.

29. In addition, some RWEs have receptionists (for example, hairdressing/beauty therapy salons), therapists, grounds maintenance staff (sports facilities), chefs, work-placement supervisors or other specialists whose main function is not training but providing and maintaining the services and products. Of all staff working in RWEs, 88% have had prior experience of real work in the area in which they provide training.

Benefits of RWEs

30. The benefits of RWEs vary according to the perceived needs of students, of teaching staff or the institution. The benefits of RWEs for students or trainees are as reported in Figure 2 (below).

Figure 2 Benefits of RWEs for students/trainees



Benefits to students

31. Assessment opportunities, motivation and skills development are clearly seen as the major benefits for students. There is more time and capacity to develop learners' skills incrementally, than in a real working environment. Correspondingly, working under pressure and developing personal effectiveness are rated less highly, perhaps because of the emphasis on maturation and development.

32. Specific benefits to students as perceived by staff include:

- integration of theory and practice
- career sampling
- real understanding of nature and pressures of work
- experience of 'unsociable' aspects of work
- developing employability
- smoothing the transition from college to work
- developing health and safety awareness and skills
- supporting those with disabilities
- developing life and communication skills
- developing customer care skills
- motivating less able students
- making learning more relevant
- building self confidence
- giving a sense of purpose
- building relationships with staff.

They are clearly connected to the transition between education and working life.

Benefits to staff

33. There are two sets of statistics for staff perceptions of benefits to themselves, as shown in Figure 3 (opposite). The first represents the views of the senior management of the institution (black bars); the second reflects the views of the managers of the RWEs (shaded bars).

34. Figure 3 shows significant overlap between the views of the senior managers and the RWE managers. The differences arise largely because the survey questionnaire did not ask both groups identical questions. (See the last five benefits listed by heads of RWEs in Figure 3.) Senior managers and managers of RWEs agree that the main benefit of RWEs is that they provide opportunities for vocational assessment, while recreating the experience of work. They also believe, though less strongly, that RWEs enhance the reputation of courses. Around half of each group thought that the use of RWEs for key skills assessment was a benefit. Less than half believed that RWEs made delivery of training easier, and only around a third of RWE managers and four out of ten senior managers thought that RWEs would contribute a financial surplus. RWE managers were strongly convinced that motivation and the opportunity for students to practise their skills in safe conditions were important additional benefits.

Benefits to the institution

35. Generally, RWE managers are more likely to see benefits in terms of the quality of training and assessment, whereas senior managers were more likely to recognise the institutional benefits summarised in Figure 4 (opposite).

36. Marketing and enhancing the reputation and image of the college appear to be major institutional benefits from the perspective of senior managers. Others included:

- creates partnerships with businesses
- provides a model for environmental management
- helps achieve quality standards and kitemarks
- makes the institution competitive
- improves progression statistics.

37. Institutional benefits identified by RWE managers reflect some of the senior managers' concerns, as the list below illustrates:

- essential for awarding body (AB) verification
- reduces costs by using commercial staff
- offers a professional image
- enables students to work to industry standards
- builds 'community'
- encourages staff development and updating.

Figure 3 | Benefits of RWEs for staff

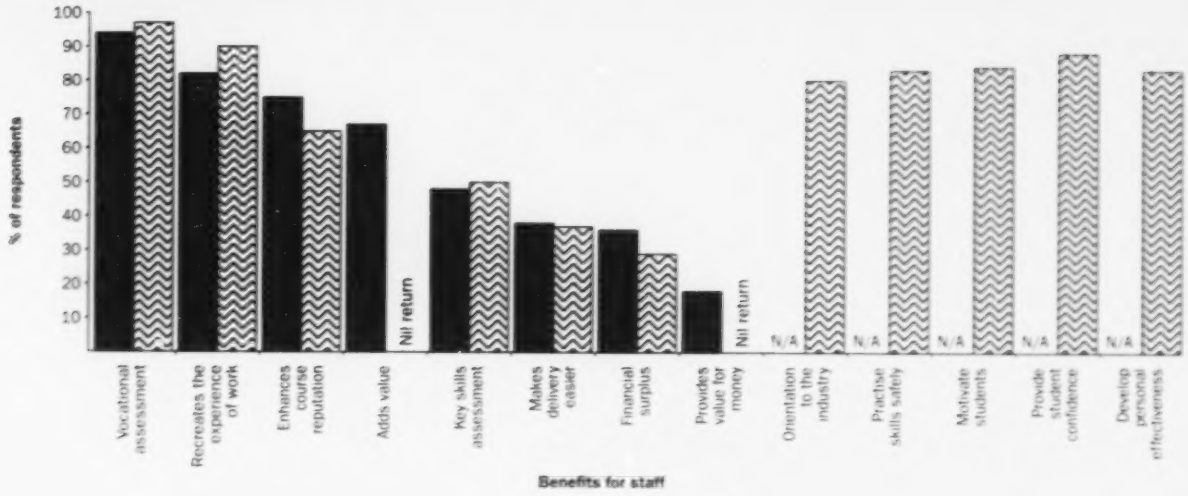
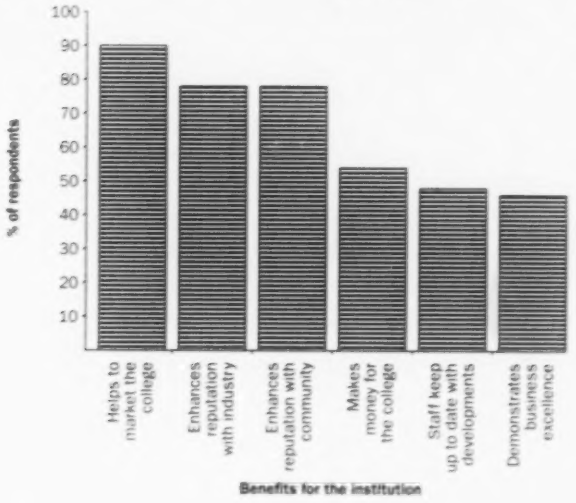


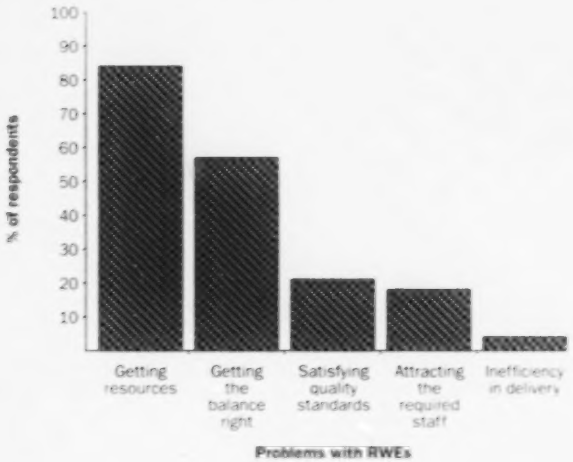
Figure 4 Institutional benefits of RWEs



Problems and issues

38. However, it is not all good news. The survey revealed that there are problems and difficulties in developing and sustaining RWEs, largely concerned with getting the resources to set up and sustain them, but also in getting the balance right between providing training and selling a service or product. The range of problems identified is shown in Figure 5 (below).

Figure 5 Problems with RWEs



39. While resourcing issues are clearly the major concern, the problem of striking a balance between the service as an enterprise and as a training resource, was also identified by over half the respondents. The enterprise can be a distraction because the service being offered is not core to FE institutions as providers of learning opportunities, particularly if it involves recruiting employees to deliver the service or run the business. However, it appears that the risk that such services might be so inefficient that they actually drain money that ought to be committed to supporting education and training is not a major concern to respondents.

40. The senior managers in the survey identified other problems, such as:

- high running costs
- convincing some awarding bodies that RWEs are authentic
- temptation for staff to do the job
- building an appropriate customer base
- threats to local businesses through unfair competition
- continuity of service around the year.

41. Senior managers in FE institutions appear to value the provision of the service over income generation, even where relatively high costs are involved. Satisfying the standards of work experience laid down by some awarding bodies in RWEs can also be difficult, especially as some awarding bodies and their external verifiers are sceptical about RWEs. The apparent inconsistency between awarding bodies in their acceptance of the validity of assessment in RWEs is also a concern. Other problems relate to the nature of the training, for example the temptation for staff to undertake tasks to ensure that they are done properly because there are paying customers, rather than treating them consistently as training opportunities. Related to this is the general fear that running RWEs poses a threat to traditional values and standards.

Running a business or giving a lesson?

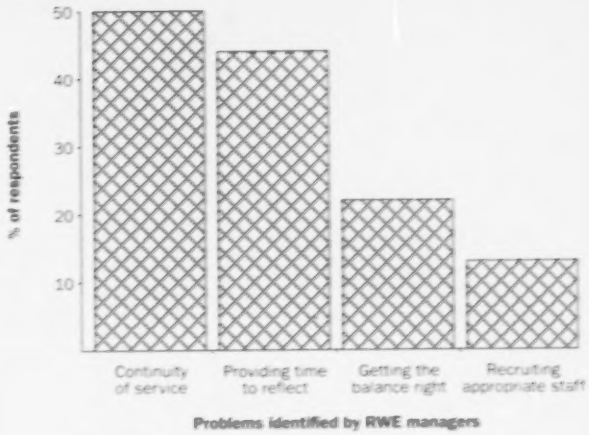
42. The tension between operating as a business and providing learning opportunities is evident. At a time when partnerships are being promoted, it does not help to build relationships with the local business community if colleges appear to be in competition with them. The college may be able to offer its service more cheaply through subsidies derived from grants and other income. On the other hand, RWEs find it hard to compete or to build up a secure client base, since even with an extended college year it is not always possible to provide continuity of service.

43. Students are not employees and have other college-based learning and study commitments, as well as holidays, which means that they may not always be available to provide a service to customers. Nor is quality necessarily guaranteed, since a trainee is providing the service. Indeed, this is one reason why colleges offer their services more cheaply than other competitors. Less than a third of RWEs used either a service level agreement or a charter to formalise arrangements between them and the customer. It may be difficult for some customers to appreciate that when they are having a haircut or eating a meal in a training restaurant, they are actually taking part in a learning opportunity. The reduced price is the trade off for this, but some customers might prefer to pay a little extra to ensure rather more quality: not being able to guarantee reliability makes it difficult to build a stable customer base.

44. The degree to which colleges wish to compete in the local economy, however, is also an issue. When asked whether there were any financial implications for companies offering the same service in the college vicinity, only 15% of those who responded thought there were, although another quarter did not know. Just under 20% stated that there were no local companies providing the same service. Competing with other companies has to be carefully considered because there could be ripple effects, which might affect the relationship between the college and local industries and businesses, especially SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises).

45. As Figure 6 (opposite) shows, RWE managers also identified problems with RWEs, some of which overlap with those identified by the senior managers, such as continuity of service and reconciling whether the focus is on service provision or training (22%). RWE managers were, however, less concerned with financial aspects of RWE provision, although 8% were worried about competing with local firms.

Figure 6 Problems identified by managers of RWEs



46. RWE managers also introduced two new problems. The first was to do with the training itself, and whether running a business enterprise left much time for reflection on learning. The second was to do with ensuring that staff recruited to support the service provision are appropriately qualified and experienced, given the rates of pay colleges are able to afford.

Continuity of service

47. Combining the results of the surveys, continuity of service appeared to be the most significant concern for all respondents. However, 46 RWEs (12%) were available for 48 weeks a year or more; only five were available for 24 weeks or less per year. The average is 36.7 weeks per year. Figures 7 and 8 (overleaf) give an indication of the availability and accessibility throughout the week. Fourteen RWES were available every day of the week; they tended to be RWEs based on agricultural or horticultural studies.

Figure 7 Number of RWEs opening each day

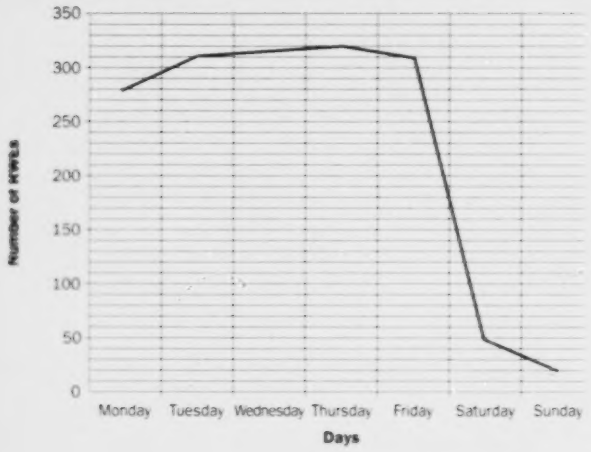


Figure 8 Average opening hours of each RWE

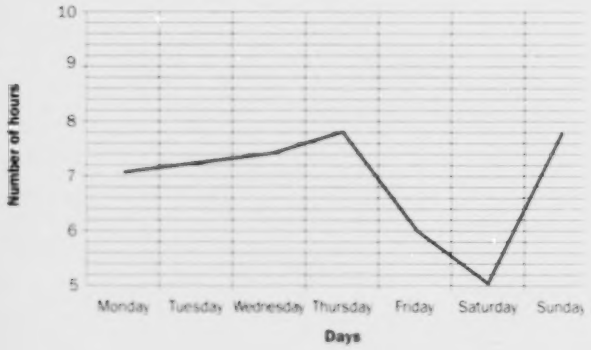
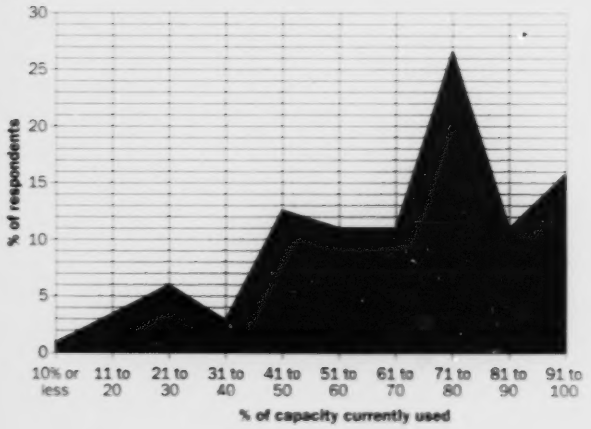


Figure 9 Capacity for expansion



Working to capacity

48. Only 44 of the 373 RWEs that responded to this question reported that they were working to full capacity and Figure 1 (see page 5) indicates that some were operating for very low numbers of students. However, Figure 9 (below) indicates that nearly three-quarters of RWEs are working above half to completely full, and that only a quarter have significant scope for expansion.

49. Only 20% of RWEs reported that they did not expect an increase in demand for their product or services, and therefore were not expecting to expand; 37% did expect an increase in demand and around 87% believed that they could accommodate an increase in demand.

Outcomes

50. There are two broad sets of outcomes to consider. The first relates to the success of the service being provided. This is typically measured in terms of profit or surplus generated. However, not all colleges operated on a financial model that required RWEs to generate a surplus. Although some were required to break even, others were being subsidised through other college resources. Table 3 (opposite) gives a breakdown of the financial models operated by the 490 managers that responded to this question.

Table 3 Financial models operated by colleges

Financial model	No.	%
Break even	155	31.6
Generate a surplus	134	27.3
Run on a trading account basis	105	21.4
Run at a cost to the college	82	16.7
Other financial considerations	14	2.9

Learning outcomes

51. The second set of indicators relates to the learning outcomes. How realistic are RWEs and do they contribute to the achievement of vocational and/or other qualifications? NVQs normally demand assessment in the workplace but there are difficulties associated with this. Opportunities for naturally occurring assessment rely on work-based assessors being available on demand. In reality many work-based assessments are contrived. The difference between this and assessment in an RWE may be minimal. There are also problems in securing sufficient opportunities to practise or develop competence, which RWEs could assist. New Deal clients in particular may be best supported in this way.

Qualification outcomes

52. A wide range of qualification outcomes was identified by respondents. The main outcomes are given in Table 4 (opposite).

53. The relatively high score for Key Skills qualifications is interesting and indicates the scope for integration and development of key skills within the RWE.

54. There were also many other vocational and non-vocational qualification outcomes, including basic literacy and numeracy awards, City and Guilds certificates, BTEC (EdExcel) National and Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, RSA awards, NEBSM supervisory management, Open College Network awards, health and safety, food hygiene, industry specific awards, such as ABTAC certificates, and university degrees (for example, B.Sc. in Podiatry).

Table 4 Main qualification outcomes

Qualification	Number	% of responses
NVQ level 1	268	68.0
NVQ level 2	346	87.8
NVQ level 3	312	79.2
NVQ level 4	23	5.8
NVQ level 5	1	0.3
GNVQ Foundation	49	12.4
GNVQ Intermediate	100	25.4
GNVQ Advanced	125	31.7
Key Skills level 1	160	40.6
Key Skills level 2	346	87.8
Key Skills level 3 and above	120	30.5

Conclusions and recommendations

55. Survey responses appear to indicate that RWEs exist in significant numbers in FE colleges, although not in sixth form colleges. Half of the respondents reported that over 50 students per week were using the RWEs for training and assessment purposes; it is therefore likely that experience of RWEs is relatively common among FE students.

56. The staff involved in teaching in, or supporting, the RWEs come from a range of backgrounds and many have relevant experience in the industry or business concerned. They are therefore potentially valuable role models for students in transition from school to work and are able to ensure relevance in the vocational curriculum.

57. There appears to be a consensus between senior managers and managers of RWEs that realistic settings provide opportunities for assessment, improve motivation and allow students to practise skills in a safe environment.

58. The major qualification outcome from RWEs is NVQs, which may be a concern if they are being achieved without real work experience. However, without further research, it is not clear that these qualifications would not have been achieved through other modes of learning, or whether the learners were also engaged in learning in the workplace.

59. Resource and financial issues appear to be of major concern to senior managers and RWE managers but perhaps less than might have been expected. On the other hand, the balance between operating as a business and providing learning opportunities, coupled with apparent unease about the lack of opportunity for reflection on learning, is clearly of great concern.

60. RWEs provide an opportunity to attract people from the community and local businesses into the college. They can convey powerful marketing messages about the ethos and quality standards of the institution. However, given the possibility of a mismatch in expectations between the RWE provider and the customer, it is surprising that only a third of respondents had either a charter or a service level agreement with their customers.

61. Issues concerning the appropriateness of the NVQ outcomes assessed in an RWE need to be addressed. There appears to be increasing recognition – prompted by the call for RVQs in the second report of the National Skills Task Force – that there is a role both for NVQs and for vocational qualifications that develop knowledge and skills in a more controlled setting. Colleges should capitalise on the opportunity to develop and practise skills in a realistic but controlled environment, rather than apologise for the lack of workplace assessment.

62. The lack of an acknowledged role for RWEs has contributed to the absence of new ones being developed. This should be considered by the new local learning and skills councils, as RVQ-type qualifications may require a more controlled, practical learning environment in which to develop vocational skills.

63. This issue perhaps relates to the debate about the extent to which 16 to 19-year-old students should be prepared by colleges to be ready for a job at the end of vocational education and training courses. Apart from safety considerations, there are occasions when it is beneficial for students to observe or practise less common procedures, in a controlled but realistic setting. It enables them to develop skills and knowledge in a less threatening environment, and ensures that the teachers can spot and correct mistakes or bad practice.

64. Not all learners using RWEs will be 16–19 year olds. Indeed, the RWE may provide a very useful learning environment for mature learners returning to education and training, or for specific updating courses for people already in the workforce.

65. The survey did not collect any evidence about the efficiency and effectiveness of the use of RWEs for achieving vocational qualifications. However, the results suggest that RWEs help to make possible the quantity, breadth and quality of the learning outcomes provided by colleges, as long as they ensure that RWEs enhance real work experience and provide opportunities to generate evidence of vocational competence and key skills in the workplace.

66. The Learning and Skills Council should ensure that the important role of RWEs is taken into account when determining how skills can be developed to meet the competitiveness agenda.

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Further education has a long tradition of providing realistic work environments (RWEs) that offer opportunities for training and assessment. But what is their contribution to skills development?

This report presents the results of a survey of all FE sector colleges to establish the prevalence and perceived value of RWEs. It provides clear evidence of the potential of RWEs to develop skills for the competitiveness agenda.

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